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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of an organizations's adaptive behavior depends on the extent to which public relations concerns are considered in goal setting and program planning. The following five open systems propositions, based on a "functional" paradigm, address the complex relationship between public relations and organizational intelligence and do not call for studying the attributes of individual practitioners. First, public relations structure and process are functions of the host organization's sensitivity to its internal and external environment. This perspective can be analyzed using both functional and historicist models. Second, the effectiveness of public relations structure and process is a function of the adequacy of information input about the environment that gets factored into organizational decision making. Third, the status of public relations in the organizational hierarchy is a function of the amount of variance in the organization's environment. Fourth, the level of public relations participation in organizational decision making is a function of the extent to which public relations engages in environmental intelligence activities. Fifth, an organization's ability to adapt to and influence its environment is a function of the nature and extent of public relations participation in management goal setting and program decision making. (Flow charts and tables are included.) (JD)

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PUBLIC RELATIONS ROLES AND SYSTEMS THEORY: FUNCTIONAL AND HISTORICIST CAUSAL MODELS

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PUBLIC RELATIONS ROLES AND SYSTEMS THEORY:

FUNCTIONAL AND HISTORICIST MODELS

Professional etiquette often demands going along with the conventional wisdom that public relations activities are rational, goal-directed management responses to an organization's environment. The more historically accurate portrayal, however, would show routine and institutionalized public relations responses that are unsystematically related to organizational survival and growth, or demise. Explanations of the relationship between public relations activities and organizational environment would draw more from Darwin's theory of evolution by natural and chance selection than from a model of scientific management and decision making.

Public relations literature is filled with reconstructive logic and post hoc analyses of selected cases of successes and failures, with few instances of systematic environmental surveillance input to decision making. What in retrospect appear to be rational selections of public relations roles and activities are often the consequences of routine and trial and error experiences--history.

An open systems model of public relations suggests purposive role-taking and activities based on a priori and specific knowledge of an organization's situation and environment. My intent here is to suggest theoretical models general enough to cover the complex relationships between the public relations function and organizational intelligence. In fact, because of the formative status of the models and in the interest of general causal imagery, I will not include precise measures or test specific research hypotheses. These will be products of subsequent efforts and challenges for those willing to help refine or refute the models.

Another purpose of this paper is to propose an open systems theory of public relations behavior that does not call for studying the attributes of individual practitioners. The theory is not tied, therefore, to the persons occupying public relations positions, in that different persons holding similar offices in similar circumstances will engage in similar patterns of role activities. This is to suggest that individual differences of practitioners have less to do with determining the role of public relations in an organization than does the organizational milieu within which the individuals practice. In the imagery of this perspective, the concepts and causal relationships of cybernetic control in organizations are more relevant than are practitioner demographic and psychographic profiles.

Adaptive Open Systems

In the open systems model, public relations is conceptually part of the organizational system's adaptive subsystem.[1] Its staff support role includes gathering, assimilating, interpreting and disseminating intelligence about the environment and the organization. Line management--the management subsystem--makes final decisions about organizational responses to changes in the environment. To be sure, public relations also supports the other subsystems--production, maintenance and disposal--vital to organizational growth and survival. This paper focuses, however, on the adaptive roles of (1) helping the management subsystem adapt an organization to its environment and (2) helping shape those environmental forces that in turn affect the organization's ability to succeed. This "functional" paradigm of public relations provides the conceptual framework for the five open systems propositions that follow.

OPEN SYSTEMS PROPOSITION 1: Public relations structure and process are functions of the host organization's sensitivity to its internal and external environments.

The theoretical basis for this proposition derives from Stinchcombe's "functional causal imagery" and "historicist causal imagery" models.[2] In the functional model, public relations structures result from the reinforcement and selection consequences of environmental tensions. In the historicist model, public relations structures tend to regenerate themselves through a self-replicating causal cycle. These models offer theoretical alternatives for explaining the structure and activities of public relations units in organizations.

The Functional Model

Cutlip, Center and Broom extend functional causal imagery to the public relations context in Figure 1.[3] Organizations that are sensitive to environmental energy, matter and information inputs select structures and processes based on these inputs. In theory, as the inputs change, so do the structures and processes selected--including those for the public relations unit. To the extent that inputs do not change, public relations responses also remain unchanged. The key point, of course, is that the nature and roles of public relations in an open systems model are selected on the basis of their consequences as resonses to inputs about the organization's environment.

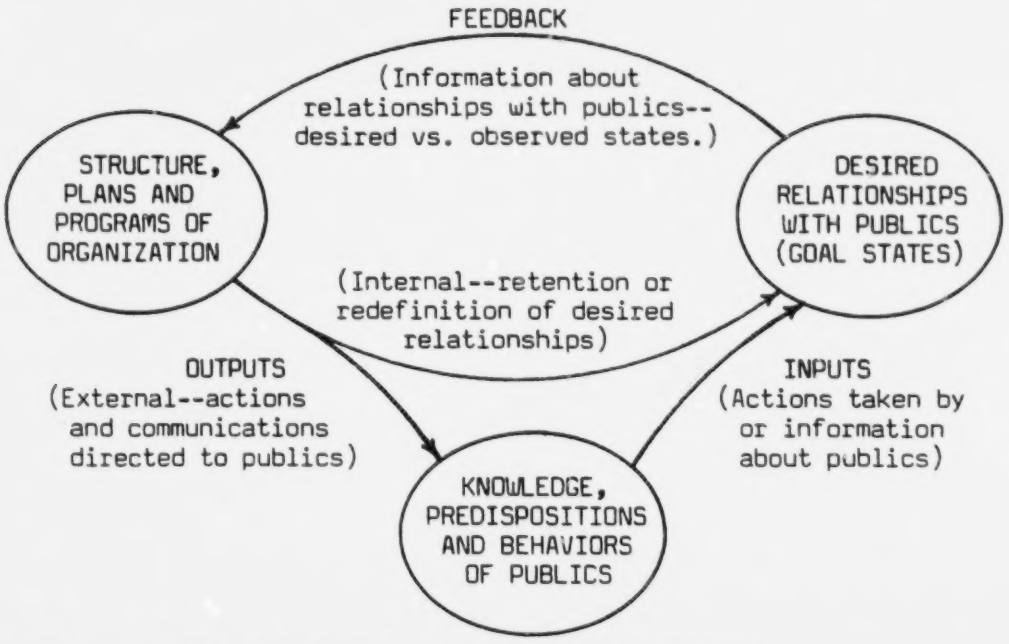
FEEDBACK
(Information about relationships with publics--desired vs. observed states.)
STRUCTURE, PLANS AND PROGRAMS OF ORGANIZATION
DESIRED RELATIONSHIPS WITH PUBLICS (GOAL STATES)
(Internal--retention or redefinition of desired relationships)
OUTPUTS (External--actions and communications directed to publics)
INPUTS (Actions taken by or information about publics)
KNOWLEDGE, PREDISPOSITIONS AND BEHAVIORS OF PUBLICS

FIGURE 1: Functional Model of Public Relations*

*Labeled "Open Systems Model" in Scott M. Cutlip, Allen H. Center and Glen M. Broom, Effective Public Relations, 6th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1985), p. 194.

Achayra's study demonstrates the functional relationship between individual practitioners' dominant role behavior and organizational environment.[4] "Communication technicians" dominate in organizations with relatively stable and non-threatening environments, suggestive of little need to be sensitive to environmental change. "Communication process facilitators" appear most frequently in organizations whose environments, while unstable, likewise pose little threat to the organization. "Expert prescribers" frequently function in organizations whose unstable and threatening environments allow little time for diagnostic environmental scanning--input. "Problem-solving process facilitators" dominate in organizations with

threatening but relatively stable environments. His findings suggest an interactive effect between environmental complexity or threat and the time available to frame responses in the form of public relations behavior.

More directly related to the proposition, however, are Grunig's exploratory findings that internal and external environmental variables are associated with his typology of public relations models.[5] His small sample of organizations precludes a definitive test, but he found the one-way "press agentry" model dominant in five small traditional organizations with few political threats from the external environment. Top managers in these organizations see public relations communication output as a means of exerting control of the external environment. Unexpectedely, the one-way "public information" model dominated in only one organization--a university's agricultural extension information office. Grunig attributes this to top management's lack of understanding of the two-way communication roles of public relations. Given the crisis in American agriculture and actual and threatened budget cuts for agricultural extension programs, one could hypothesize that the role of public relations in such units has or will change from what Grunig reported in 1984. Then again this case may represent an anomaly even at that time.

As Grunig's theory predicts, four large and complex organizations confronted with uncertain political and regulatory environments exhibited two-way "asymmetric" behavior as the dominant model of public relations. Five complex organizations with only moderate threat of political or regulatory constraints fit the two-way "symmetric" model of public relations.

His exploratory study findings are consistent with the Proposition 1 relationship between environmental sensitivity and public relations structure

and process. His indices for the four models include measures of the role and types of research used. His one-way "press agenty/publicity" and "public information" items measure the extent to which public relations is "an art that cannot be measured and evaluated" and "there is no time to do any research." On the other hand, the two-way model indices include items asking about the use of surveys and informal methods to monitor both internal and external environments. In terms of Proposition 1, these items measure organizational sensivitiy to internal and external environments--as represented by research activities.

Similarly, Wilensky concludes that a functional causal relationship exists between an organization's environment and its internal capacity for environmental inputs.[6] The amount of resources devoted to organizational intelligence depends on the nature of an organization's internal and external environments. The greater the conflict or competition with the external environment, the greater the dependence on internal support and unity, the more the external environment is viewed as subject to planned influence, and the greater the size and complexity of the organization itself, then the more elaborate the structure and the greater the activities devoted to organizational intelligence.

Zucker summarizes the functional relationship between an organization and its environment as simply "...the external institutional environment contains the organization, determining its internal structure, its growth or decline, and often even its survival."[7]

The Historicist Model

Whereas the open systems functional model of public relations suggests

a causal relationship between the inputs and the nature of public relations structure and processes, the closed systems approach is analogous to Stinchcombe's "historicist causal imagery."[8] As the boundary between the organization and its environment becomes impermeable to environmental inputs, public relations structure and process increasingly reflect historical, routine and institutionalized behaviors. Explanations of public relations under these conditions call to mind the imagery of perpetual motion machines--infinite, self-replicating causal loops with the original causes or motivations lost in history. The behaviors observed represent routine patterns of responses insensitive to changes in the environment.

Two variations of historicist causal imagery seem particularly relevant to the public relations context--institutional and sunk-costs structures. Figure 2 depicts the institutionalized power explanation for closed systems public relations. This model suggests that observed public relations responses reflect the historical preferences of those with decision-making power. Such power in an organization may reside with line management or at the top of the public relations hierarchy. New graduates entering the field acknowledge this power when they express concerns about their inability to effect change in how public relations is done by introducing their new knowledge and skills. "Because we have always done it this way" and "because I am the boss" come to mind as phrases associated with this explanation of public relations behavior.

Not to be overlooked is the influence of public relations education in contributing to institutional historicist causality. Educators espousing conventional wisdom and telling "war stories" of past triumphs and failures prepare students to repeat the past rather than address the present or future. Courses steep students in heavy doses of journalistic skills (information

output) without equal emphasis on social science research and environmental monitoring skills (information input). As a result, new practitioners are burdened with notions of public relations as simply the application of a laundry list of communication techniques formulated in past situations that can be skillfully modified to conform to the values and goals in new situations and other organizations. "Telling-our-story" success stories and the multitude of "what-we-did-when-it-hit-the-fan-at-our-place" case studies are typical of this approach in which past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior.

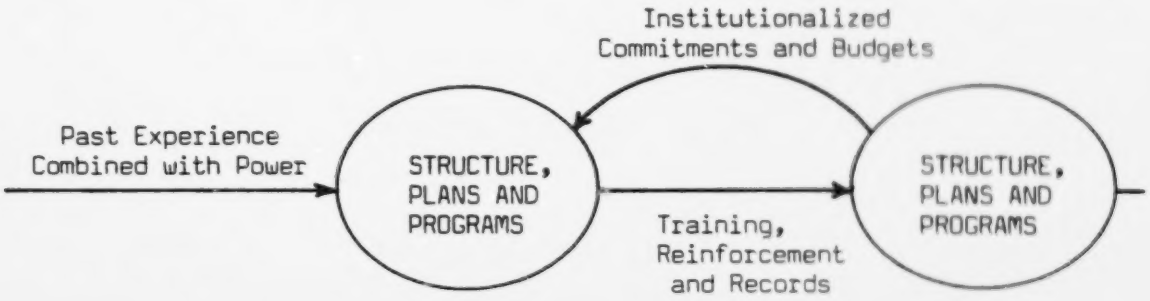

FIGURE 2: Historicist Model of Public Relations*

*Adapted from Arthur L. Stinchcombe, Constructing Social Theories (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968), p. 119.

The second variation on the general historicist causal model is the "sunk-costs" explanation of public relations behaviors. Past investments in human and physical program resources are maintained because of the high cost of replacement or redesign. From a budgetary perspective, it is simply less costly to carry on with past structures and programs than to make adjustments because of changing conditions in the organizational environment. Also, it is easier to budget based on past experience than to budget in anticipation of

future demands. As a result, public relations units and activities become survivors of routine decision making.

The self-replicating processes of institutionalized and sunk-costs historicist explanations describe closed systems approaches to public relations. In both models, the original motivations for the activities are lost in history and the system is relatively closed to new environmental inputs to the decision-making process. Dynamic environments and the passage of time increase the probability that once functional responses will become dysfunctional.

> OPEN SYSTEMS PROPOSITION 2: **The effectiveness of public relations structure and process is a function of the adequacy of information input about the environment that gets factored into organizational decision making.**

The distinguishing characteristic of an open system--its ability to adapt to environmental changes because of its sensitivity and responsiveness to environmental inputs--has its parallel in public relations. Krippendorff and Eleey report how media content analyses can provide data for making public relations strategies more effective.[9] They found geographic differences in media usage of press releases provided by the Public Broadcasting Corporation and AT&T--suggestive of a need to use other methods in the Northeast where orignial reporting is the norm. The data also show that media usage of PBS releases differed according to program types--suggesting that different strategies be used to increase media coverage of some broadcasts. They go on to show how such findings from media content analysis can be correlated with other "surveillance information" to identify needed public relations strategy

changes.

Proposition 2 also summarizes Ehling's effectively argued concept of the role of research in public relations management decision making:

> ...Research, both factual and evaluative, plays an important role in the total process of public relations management. Without competent and thorough research of an organization's environment, there is no basis for assessing opportunities or threats facing the organization and, hence, no way of determining the existence or the possible emergence of a pulic relations setting or situation. Without an adequate review and evaluation of the program performance there is no basis for determining whether desired goal-states have been attained or for determining what should be done if they are not attained. Without such research public relations is incomplete and flawed, and management is replaced by technical behavior.[10]

Bell and Bell make the same point in their contrast between "functionary" vs. "functional" public relations:

> Because functionaries do not supply feedback information, they do not function in decision-making or even in advisory roles in relation to environmental concerns. ...Another effect of restricted information is that it often leads to a crisis orientation toward internal and external publics. Since public relations in the functionary mode is not engaged in surveying its environments, trends and developments which may have great impact on the organization may go unnoticed until a problem becomes acute. ...<u>In the functional mode, public relations keeps gates open in as well as out</u>. It thus has the potential to act in an advisory capacity and to have impact on decision-making. This potential in turn leads to some control over its own domain in times of crisis and, as a sensing device, public relations can be effective in preventing many potential crisis situations.[11]

This perspective provides the rationale for including preparation in a wide range of research skills in public relations curricula and professional development programs. A review of university and professional offerings, however, indicate that such a perspective is not reflected and that the output functionary model dominates topic selection.

OPEN SYSTEMS PROPOSITON 3: The status of public relations in the organizational hierarchy is a function of the amount of variance in the organization's environment.

Whereas direct measures of the relationship are not readily available, studies of individual practitioners' roles provide some evidence in support of the proposition. Differences in roles, salaries and participation in decision making--hypothetically related to public relations' status in hierarchy--are related to the amount of variance in the environment.[12]

Table 1 superimposes salaries and participation in management decision making related to new policies onto Acharya's findings of the relationship between environmental uncertainty and public relations roles.

Table 1. Environmental Variance and Status of Public Relations

	Low Threat	High Threat
Little Change	Communication[a] Technician $37,800[b] - .14[c]	Problem-Solving Process Facilitator $54,300 .59
Much Change	Communication Process Facilitator $44,600 .47	Expert Prescriber $67,700 .54

[a]Dominant role of public relations practitioners.
[b]Mean salary of practitioners in dominant role.
[c]Correlation of role index with participation in adoption of new policies by management.

Salary is clearly related to environmental variance in that practitioners are paid more in the "high threat" column and in the "much change" row. Practitioner involvement in management's adoption of new policies

follows the pattern of the dominant roles, reflecting the interaction effect of change and threat. Although based on measures of individual practitioners, all three indices show a systematic relationship between environmental variance and the status of public relations consistent with Proposition 3.

> OPEN SYSTEMS PROPOSITION 4: **The level of public relations participation in organizational decision making is a function of the extent to which public relations engages in environmental intelligence activities.**

Studies of individual practitioner use of research to plan, monitor and evaluate public relations programs yield findings consistent with Proposition 4. Those in management roles use both formal and informal research to a greater extent than do those operating in the technician dominant role. Dozier found that "in the real world of public relations, the practitioner who manages the public relations effort uses multiple styles of evaluation, both subjective and objective, both 'seat of the pants' and 'scientific.'"[13]

In their comparison of 1979 and 1985 survey data from a panel of 208 Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) members, Broom and Dozier found that increases in overall evaluation research activities by practitioners were associated with increased participation in management decision making.[14] The data also demonstrate that movement into management decision-making roles does not come primarily from years of experience or tenure in position. Rather, the extent to which practitioners used research in their programs best explained increased participation in the higher-level activities associated with management.

Kraemer's study of practitioner participation in corporate planning and

decision making found a significant correlation between that behavior and what she called "environmental monitoring" activities.[15] At the time of her study--1981--"scanning for planning" and "futures research" were hot topics in management journals. In his most recent study, Dozier reports more evidence of the relationship between organizational intelligence and public relations' role in management.[16] He and his graduate students surveyed a national sample of 1985 PRSA and International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) members using 40 items developed from results of a focus group discussion and depth interviews with practitioners. He concludes that, "Environmental scanning provides access to management decision-making sessions, over and above the access provided by playing the public relations manager role in the organization."

Whereas these studies represent management involvement of individual practitioners, not the entire public relations unit, the consistency and strength of the relationships found in these studies stand as the basis for Proposition 4.

> OPEN SYSTEMS PROPOSITION 5: An organization's ability to adapt to and to influence its environment is a function of the nature and extent of public relations participation in management goal setting and program decision making.

The emphasis on accountability and achievement of objectives (ends) in public relations is a shift from its traditional--and still dominant--focus on communication output and action strategies (means). Public relations technicians operate primarily on the basis of what Simon calls "programmed decisions," in that programs are ritualized.[17]

Job descriptions and prescribed activities become ritualized, thereby minimizing decision-making for the actors--analogous to the imagery in historicist causal model. The purpose, of course, is to assure a steady flow of work--output--and to produce a collective product from the efforts of the individual actors. Feedback is primarily for coordination and control, or at most, for making adjustments as communication outputs are compared with performance criteria spelled out in the program.

"Nonprogrammed decisions," on the other hand, are made in novel or unstructured situations and focus on the ends to be achieved. As organizations must survive in dynamic environments, much of public relations falls--conceptually--into this mode of decision making. Selecting structure and process as nonprogrammed decisions is consistent with the imagery of the functional causal model. Such organizational behavior requires intelligence about the environment and the impact of program outputs, in addition to control, coordination, and adjustment feedback. This adaptive feedback introduces the possibility of changes in organizational priorities, structures, policies, procedures, products and all other aspects of the production, disposal, maintenance and managerial subsystems.

The open systems model of public relations deduced from this approach to organizational decision making, feedback and regulation is similar to Hage's theory of cyberntics in organizational regulation.[18] Figure 3 depicts the control, adjustment and adaptation feedback model. It elevates public relations to the level of being part of adaptive decision making, without minimizing the essential nature of control and adjustment feedback in effective programming.

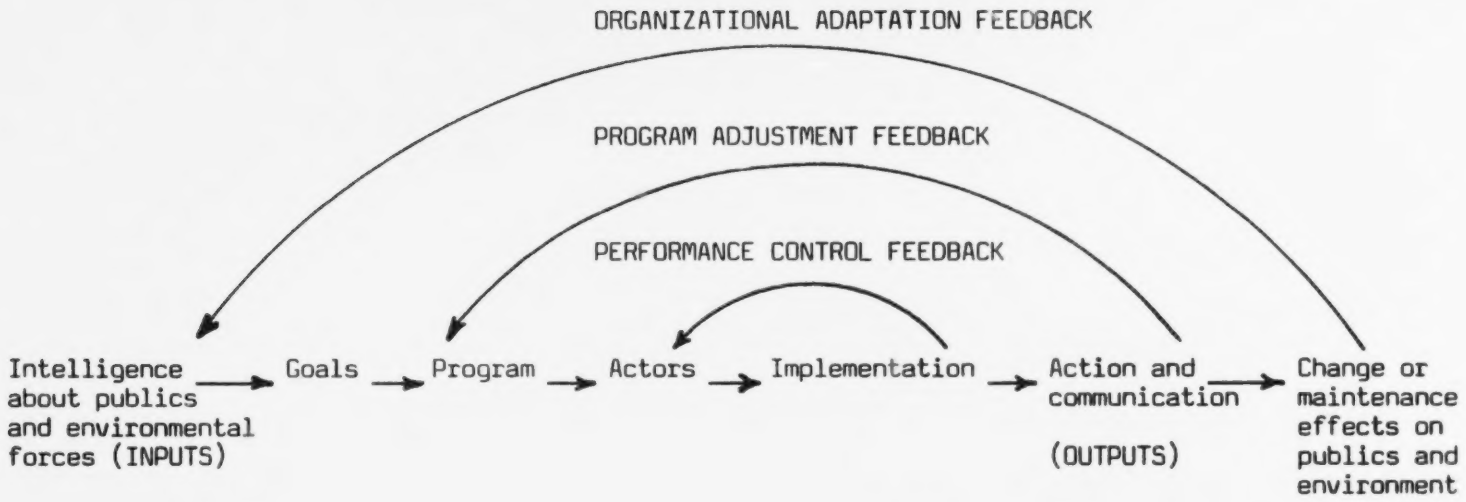

FIGURE 3. Open Systems Public Relations Feedback Model*

*Adapted from model in Jerald Hage, Communication and Organizational Control: Cybernetics in Health and Welfare Settings (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974), p. 239.

That public relations "managers" operate with different types of feedback is evident in Ferguson's empirically derived role behavior patterns.[19] Items such as "assessing/evaluating alternative PR solutions," "analyzing facts about a PR problem or program," "planning PR programs," "developing alternative PR solutions," "developing long-range goals for PR unit," "telling employer what PR emphasis should be," "daily managing specific programs," and "telling employer what PR unit is doing" items load on her "problem-solver manager role" factor. A separate factor--what she calls the "staff manager role"--shows high factor loadings for "managing PR unit staff," "training PR unit staff," "recruiting staff," and "telling employer's policy decisions to PR staff." A plausible explanation for why these two appear as separate factors in her analysis is suggested by the model in Figure 3. Problem-solver managers are those using adaptive and adjustment feedback, whereas staff managers are using primarily (if not exclusively) performance control feedback to coordinate the internal operations of implementation.

The problem-solver manager operates consistent with the imagery of the functional causal model, whereas the staff manager limits feedback to the intra-organizational feedback loop depicted in the historicist causal model. To the extent that the adapative feedback is not available to a public relations unit, public relations structure and process eventually become dysfunctional and unresponsive to the organization's environment.

Likewise, the effectiveness of the total organization's adaptive behavior depends on the extent to which public relations contributes intelligence to and participates in goal-setting and program planning. In the absence of these management-level activities, public relations is subsumed by

another unit and cast in the role of technical support staff to implement programs dictated by others' values and perceptions of the environment.

These propositions have not been tested by any single piece of research or even the collected works reported here. Instead they serve as the basis for a theoretical model to motivate research for refining and testing an open systems model of public relations.

FOOTNOTES

[1]For a more thorough discussion of these subsystems, see Sue H. Bell and Eugene C. Bell, "Public Relations: Functional or Functionary?" Public Relations Review, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Summer 1976), pp. 49-50; or the original sources, Chris Argyris, Integrating the Individual and the Organization (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1964), and Daniel Katz and Robert L. Kahn, The Social Psychology of Organizations, 2nd ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978).

[2]Arthur L. Stinchcombe, Constructing Social Theories (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968).

[3]Scott M. Cutlip, Allen H. Center and Glen M. Broom, "Chapter 8--Adjustment and Adaptation: A Theoretical Model for Public Relations," Effective Public Relations, 6th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1985), pp. 183-98.

[4]Lalit Acharya, "Public Relations Environments," Journalism Quarterly, Vol. 62, No. 3 (Autumn 1985), pp. 577-84. The role concepts were first explicated in Glen M. Broom and George D. Smith, "Testing the Practitioner's Impact on Clients," Public Relations Review, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Fall 1979), pp. 47-59.

[5]James E. Grunig, "Organizations, Environments, and Models of Public Relations," Public Relations Review & Education, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Winter 1984), pp. 6-29.

[6]Harold L. Wilensky, Organizational Intelligence: Knowledge and Policy in Government and Industry (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1967), p. 10.

[7]Lynne G. Zucker, "Organizations as Institutions," in Research in the Sociology of Organizations: A Research Annual (Vol. 2, 1983), ed. Samuel B. Bacharach (Greenwich, Conn.: Jai Press Inc., 1983), p. 4.

[8]Stinchcombe, Constructing Social Theories, pp. 118-25.

[9]Klaus Krippendorff and Michael F. Eleey, "Monitoring a Group's Symbolic Environment," Public Relations Review, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Spring 1986), pp. 13-36.

[10]William P. Ehling, "Application of Decision Theory in the Construction of a Theory of Public Relations Management. II," Public Relations Research & Education, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Summer 1985), p. 20.

[11]Bell and Bell, "Functional or Functionary," pp. 52-53.

[12]Dominant role data are from Acharya, "Public Relations Environments," p. 584. Salary figures taken from Glen M. Broom and David M. Dozier, "Advancement for Public Relations Role Models," Public Relations Review, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Spring 1986), p. 47. Participation in adopting new policies correlations reported by Donald J. Johnson and Lalit Acharya, "Organizational Decision Making and Public Relations Roles," paper presented to the Association for Education in Journalism Annual Convention, Athens, Ohio, August 1982.

[13]David M. Dozier, "Program Evaluation and the Roles of Practitioners," Public Relations Review, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Summer 1984), pp. 19-20.

[14]Glen M. Broom and David M. Dozier, "Determinants and Consequences of Public Relations Roles," paper presented to the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Annual Convention, Memphis, Tenn., August 1985.

[15]Sharon Bradley Kraemer, "Public Relations Practitioner Involvement in Environmental Monitoring Research as a Predictor of Involvement in Corporate Planning" (M.S. thesis, San Diego State University, 1981).

[16]David M. Dozier, "The Environmental Scanning Function of Public Relations Practitioners and Participation in Management Decision Making," draft of paper to be presented to the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Annual Convention, Norman, Ok., August 1986.

[17]Herbert A. Simon, The New Science of Management Decision (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), pp. 5-6.

[18]Jerald Hage, Communication and Organizational Control: Cybernetics in Health and Welfare Settings (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974).

[19]Mary Ann Ferguson, "Some Empirically-Generated Public Relations Roles and Associations with Various Descriptive Variables," paper presented to the Associaton for Education in Journalism Annual Convention, Houston, Texas, August 1979. A separate factor--"researcher"--included items describing systematic research activities such as opinion surveys and communication audits. Ferguson concludes that her findings indicate that individual practitioners develop specialized roles.